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AT&T wireless CEO on fake 5G complaints: 'that makes me smile'

By Jacob Kastrenakes | @jake_k | Jan 9, 2019, 6:30pm EST

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The leader of AT&T's wireless division indicated that the carrier won't back down from [its misleading 5G advertising](#), saying he's happy to be causing consternation for his competitors. "If I now occupy beachfront real estate in our competitors' heads, that makes me smile," AT&T Communications CEO John Donovan said during an appearance on stage at CES today.

Donovan was responding to criticism from [Verizon](#), [T-Mobile](#), and [Sprint](#) over AT&T's decision to update some of its phones to display an icon that reads "5G E" instead of "LTE" when connected to faster pockets of its 4G LTE network. The icon refers to "5G Evolution," which is how AT&T is branding those portions of its 4G network — despite there being no actual 5G technology involved. The icon isn't appearing on 5G phones, either. AT&T just took existing LTE phones and essentially slapped a fake 5G label on them.

That's just how marketing works, Donovan seemed to say on stage. "Every company is guilty of building a narrative of how you want the world to work," Donovan said. "And I love the fact that we broke our industry's narrative two days ago, and they're frustrated and gonna do what they're gonna do."

"EVERY COMPANY IS GUILTY OF BUILDING A NARRATIVE OF HOW YOU WANT THE WORLD TO WORK."

Donovan also said the 5G E icon is meant to help consumers understand what kind of speeds to expect from their phone. "We did customer research, and they were very not only amenable, but interested in learning when they were on that network experience," he said, referring to the close to 400 markets where AT&T has rolled out speed-boosting LTE tech.

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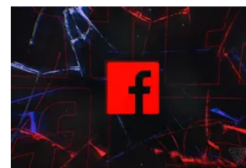
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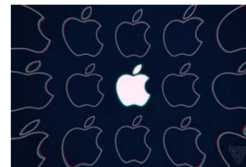


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gonna do what they're gonna do."

Donovan also said AT&T didn't want to be confused by carriers and what kind of speeds to expect from their phone. "We did customer research, and they were very not only amenable, but interested in learning when they were on that network experience," he said, referring to the close to 400 markets where AT&T has rolled out speed-boosting LTE tech.

But the speeds AT&T is talking about aren't particularly special. AT&T has previously said that customers can only expect average speeds of around 40 Mbps from "5G E," which isn't much different than what you'd get in a city on AT&T already. Verizon's LTE network is even faster than that on average, according to measurements taken last year by Tom's Guide.

AT&T seems to be well aware of what it's doing. By changing LTE icons to say "5G E," a large number of its subscribers will be seeing a "5G" icon easily a year or more before subscribers of other carriers do. That could give it an edge in consumer perception as the 5G marketing battle heats up. Donovan even acknowledges how important that little icon is, noting that "that real estate has always been the place that the customer goes to see what's happening with my network."

After AT&T starting updating three phones — Samsung's Galaxy S8 Active and LG's V30 and V40 — with the 5G E icon earlier this week, its competitors started coming out with criticism of the confusing branding. T-Mobile posted a video where it covered up an iPhone's LTE icon with a sticky note reading "9G," saying "didn't realize it was this easy." Verizon published full page ads in four major newspapers calling on the industry not to mislead consumers with 5G advertising. And Sprint came out saying "AT&T is blatantly misleading consumers."

AT&T has said it plans to roll out the 5G E icon to more devices this spring.



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